DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 564 PS 011 937

TITLE Foster Care, Part 1-4. Options in Education Program Nos. 276-279.
INSTITUTION George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C. Inst. for Educational Leadership.: National Public Radio, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 62p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Abuse: *Child Rearing: Court Role: Emotional Experience: *Foster Children: *Foster Family: Legislation: Parent Child Relationship: *Social Problems: *Social Services

ABSTRACT

These transcriptions reproduce four National Public Radio interviews with individuals concerned with and involved in the provision of foster care to children and youth. The interviews cover a wide range of topics, including previous traumatic experiences of children brought into foster care, the low level of remuneration provided to foster parents, and dynamics of foster child and foster parent relationships. Stress experienced by the foster child who is a candidate for adoption, problems of managing attachment and disengagement, relationships between biological and foster children, as well as needs, concerns and troubles of foster children are explored. Additional interviews focus on aspects of the relationship between the courts and the foster family. Controversy among judges and caseworkers and problems in coordinating requirements of the social service system and the interests of the child and the community are probed. The interviews then return to focus more closely on the foster children in order to depict their hopes and aspirations. In conclusion, recommendations for improving foster care delivery systems are advanced and legislative initiatives in California are briefly critiqued. (Author/RH)

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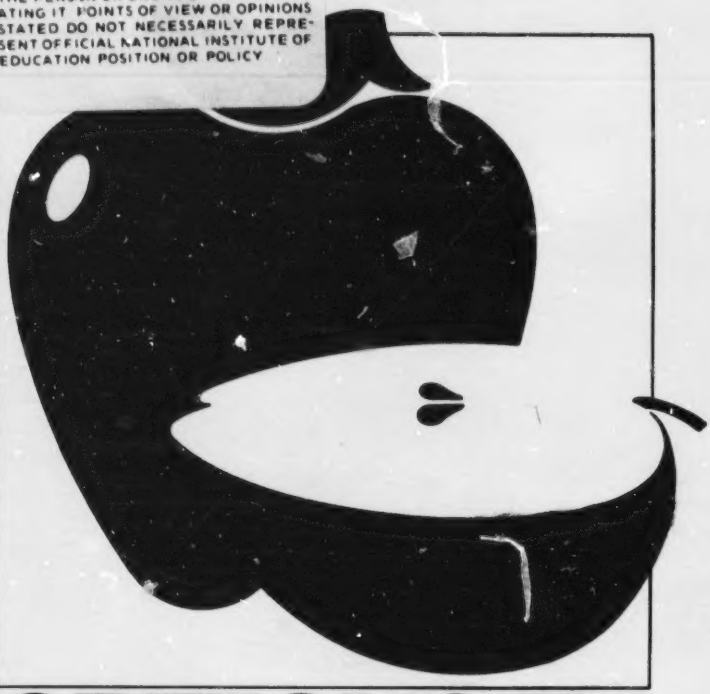

OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

takes listeners to the core of the issues

FOSTER CARE, PARTS 1-4, PROGRAM NOS. 276-279

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Program No. 276: Foster Care, Part 1

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FOSTER CARE, PART ONE

A WOMAN WHOSE FOSTER SON HAD ONCE BEEN STARVED AND NOW STASHES SANDWICHES IN HIS DRESSER, FOR SECURITY

FOSTER MOTHER: When they first came to me, they'd go in the kitchen at nightime, when we were watching television, and they'd make up a big fat sandwich and take it in and hide it in their chest of drawers, so they would have something to eat during the night. And I found that one time, and to the youngest one I said, "Honey, why did you put this sandwich in your chest of drawers?" He said, "Well, momma, I get hungry in the night." I said, "Then why don't you get up, go in and get fresh bread, lunch meat, whatever you want, and make you a sandwich? Come wake me up and I'll get up and make it for you if you're hungry." Oh? That was so -- something, you know, that they just weren't used to. They'd had to steal everything.

REINHARDT: The boy had reason to be distrustful. He'd been in and out of foster homes, some good, some bad, for years.

MERROW: He's one of somewhere around half a million kids in foster care today, and if we sound vague about the number it's because no-one knows for sure.

REINHARDT: Nearly all of those children were taken out of their natural homes because of abuse, neglect, or what was viewed as a poor environment. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, for NPR's Options in Education, with the first of a series on foster care.

REINHARDT: We're being careful not to say the foster care system, because it turns out there really is no one system. More like a confusion of different agencies, conflicting priorities and ambiguous rules.

MERROW: There isn't even a common kind of foster care. There's long term, emergency short term, private, public, group home and homes that take in only one or two foster children.

REINHARDT: Emergency short term may mean middle of the night care for an abandoned newborn or for a terrified child who's just seen his father beat up his mother.

MERROW: Short term usually means two weeks or less, until the social service agency can find a long term home, or perhaps place the child back into her own home.

REINHARDT: Glenda Gillis is one of only 80 parents providing emergency short term care for the entire county of Los Angeles.

GLENDA GILLIS IN L.A. PROVIDES EMERGENCY SHORT TERM CARE

GILLIS: We are kept very busy. In fact sometimes I just go off call to take a rest. But the need is tremendous. There just aren't that many short term emergency foster homes.

MERROW: When did you last get called?

GILLIS: Last night, as a matter of fact. I have a three year old boy that we received last night from a hospital who had been very badly abused by one, either the mother or the father. We're not sure at this point. For not potty training himself.

MERROW: Badly abused, meaning?

GILLIS: Well, his injuries were extensive enough that he was on an IV for quite some time and he had multiple contusions and bruises. Fortunately nothing was broken. That's one of our milder incidences.

MERROW: So he was ready to get out of the hospital but he obviously couldn't go home.

GILLIS: Right. And unless there is a relative that can come forth and prove that they can take adequate care of the child, or lots of times the relative will be concerned that the parents may intervene, and so for the child's safety they will leave the child in placement until perhaps the parents may take therapy, or the parents may prove that it was in fact a fluke, that it won't happen again, or just whatever course the Judge decides to take is what happens.

MERROW: You have another short term child here.

GILLIS: Right. We have a three week old baby who was taken away from his mother because she had very seriously abused the other four children in the family. So when she was pregnant and in court on the last case, the Judge said, "When you have that baby you will not take that one home." So I was really pleased to see the Judge do that, because she never had a chance to abuse this one, and she is in extensive therapy, and this baby definitely will go to a long term foster home. In fact the only reason I still have her is because they have none available at the present time.

REINHARDT: Glenda Gillis. She and her husband provide emergency foster care in Los Angeles County. The Gillises have two children of their own and are about to adopt a third, a child who came for emergency short term care seven years ago.

MERROW: Some foster parents specialize, taking only infants or only pre-school kids or only teenagers. Their homes may be licensed for one child or for several. Most communities have strict requirements regarding sleeping space, play areas and washing and cooking facilities.

REINHARDT: In 28 years as a foster parent, Genevieve Dewald has taken care of over 400 children, nearly all pre-schoolers and infants. She has two foster children in her home now, ages four and six and a half.

MERROW: She and her husband, a truck dispatcher, have lived in the same Los Angeles neighborhood all those years. I asked her about the neighbors' reaction to her taking kids in.

GENEVIEVE DEWALD TAKES CARE OF TWO CHILDREN

DEWALD: In the neighborhood, I'm the neighborhood doctor. "Mrs. Dewald, my little boy has got this or that. What shall I do?" No, people generally can understand how we can have youngsters come and stay for two or three months and then be able to move on to another home. But after all, this is a job. It isn't -- we aren't taking them to keep them. We're taking them to help the youngsters and help their parents and future parents.

MERROW: You are emotionally involved, that's clear. I wonder, do you ever get angry at these kids, want to spank them, whatever?

DEWALD: Oh, certainly, we always have angers and so forth, and I try not to take it out on the kids if I get angry, though.

MERROW: When you're angry, do you still think of them as your kids, or do you suddenly then think of them as somebody else's kids that you're just taking care of?

DEWALD: Well, I never -- you've always got to keep that line between, that they're not really your kids. But still, you've got to take care of them like your kids. And at that time I just kind of stop and think, well, what would I do if they were my kids. And I don't ever want to mistreat a child. If I do, I want somebody to snatch it away and tell me that's it, because that would be going too far.

MERROW: Why do you suppose there's a shortage of foster parents? Why aren't there more people like you?

DEWALD: I think a lot of people are selfish. They don't want to share their life with somebody else. Because it does take a lot of your time to take care of those -- you know, the other

kids. But so many people say, well, there's so many things you could do if you didn't have those kids. I said, "Well, when I had my own kids I took them with me. We did things. Foster kids are the same way."

REINHARDT: Genevieve Dewald of Los Angeles. She and her husband provide foster care through a private agency, The Children's Home Society. The Dewalds receive five dollars a day per child.

MERROW: Most foster care is publicly provided and paid for Los Angeles, for instance, has about 10,000 children in foster care. Only a few hundred are being cared for through private agencies.

REINHARDT: Like most other cities, L. A. doesn't have enough foster parents, only about 3,300 for 10,000 kids in need. In the last year, more than 2,000 families have stopped taking in foster children, most saying that because of inflation they can't afford to keep the kids.

MERROW: When there aren't enough foster families, the children may end up going back home to the same conditions that made them foster children in the first place, or they may end up in a group home or an institution.

REINHARDT: Group homes and institutions are used for more than the overflow of foster kids. They're also the places the system sends the toughest cases, the older teenagers, the handicapped and emotionally disturbed.

MERROW: Voley and Donna Pyles began taking in foster children as their own seven children grew up and moved away. Before long, they got a specialized licensed, meaning they could run a group home for the toughest cases. Over the years, they've had 34 teenagers.

REINHARDT: According to Reverend Pyles -- he's a Baptist Minister -- love and sympathy aren't enough.

VOLIE AND DONNA PYLES ARE FOSTER PARENTS IN CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS

REV. PYLES: We feel that there have to be some practical reasons for foster parents to become foster parents. We have seen through the years of pastoring that a number of people would feel that they love children and be moved with pity and so forth for foster children and would ask to be licensed as foster parents, and then, when they'd get the foster children who many times have discipline problems, not all of them but some of them, particularly older ones, they'd run into a situation that didn't agree with their

particular style of conduct and they'd call up the social worker and say, "Get this kid out of here, we don't want him anymore." We've seen that happen several times and we've observed that there has to be practical reasons for being foster parents if you're going to last in it, and our practical reason was twofold. One, we had a big house with empty rooms and we didn't like the empty rooms and the other was we had been used to a house full of kids and we just didn't want it getting empty.

Well, one boy we got out of a mental institution, from a halfway house. He had extreme difficulty. And some of them were from -- boys that were in boys' homes which were, oh, they were there because there were problems that could not be handled in a foster situation, where life was very regimented. One boy, a very bright, intelligent boy, 130 IQ, got into just a little mischief in his junior high year and his father told the social worker -- the father was illiterate -- the father told the social worker, "He belongs in a juvenile delinquents home. Get him out of here. I never want to see him again." And he never saw him again. Hasn't to this day.

Almost all foster children, almost all, not all, but the far greater percent that we know about of foster children, are foster children do to no fault of their own. We had one or two that got into trouble with the law and was placed into one of these boys' homes and then -- or one of these sort of halfway retention homes -- you wouldn't exactly call it juvenile, but it's in essence a retention home -- then they were brought to us to make the adjustment back to normal life. But that was a very small percentage. The most of them were foster children by no fault of their own, and yet they bore a sense of guilt, feeling that they contributed to the breakup of their natural home. One boy in particular was -- had absolutely no relative contact He came to us at the age of 14 after having been in an unofficial foster home. Someone had just took him for 10 years and there was absolutely no contact could be found, or no record of his parents. Knew who his parents were, but where they were, couldn't find at all.

BOND: What did you do?

MRS. PYLES: Well, I think a lot of them have lost all confidence in themselves and some of the things we tried to do were restore their confidence in their own ability. We first of all, as he said, when they came in our home we told them that when they came they came without previous guilt. In other words, we knew that they had done some things that were wrong, but as far as we were concerned, they were starting just like newborn babes, without guilt. Okay.

And then the addition of a new wardrobe, it's amazing what confidence that puts into a child. They can go to school with their head held high, not with wrinkled, faded shirts and jeans and floppy shoes and so forth. They can hold their heads up with their peers.

We accepted them -- I guess you'd have to -- it's hard --

REV. PYLES: Respectfully.

MRS. PYLES: Yeah, we treated them with respect.

REV. PYLES: We cannot honestly say that we loved every one of our foster children, but we can say that we had respect for them as a person. So we used the word respect as the starting point, to respect them as an individual. We're not looking to their background. We're not looking to their parents or anything else. And then to give them a sense of self-respect, because we respect them.

MRS. PYLES: One comment that I'd like to make is that so many times foster parents get permanently attached to their kids. One particular boy that we thought a lot of had an opportunity to go back home to his parents. His mother remarried. So he went back with her and it just kind of hit me, he went out the front door and he'd been with us -- two and a half years?

REV. PYLES: A year and a half.

MRS. PYLES: A year and a half. You know, we'd been family for a year and a half, and here he went out the front door and never so much as turned around and said goodbye. You know, it just kind of really got me. He was so tickled to be able to go home, you know, no matter what home was, and it wasn't much. But no matter what home was, that was where his mother was. It hit me then, you can't really permanently attach yourself to your foster kids, because when the time comes for them to go, they're going to go suddenly. And if you are emotionally bound up with that child as you would be with your own natural child, you're going to be hurt over and over and over again, if you have very many foster kids. You have to learn to accept them into your home, into your family, to be adjustable to them, and then to let them go.

REINHARDT: Donna and Volie Pyles, talking to reporter Janet Bond in Champaign, Illinois.

MERROW: The Pyles say they never made money running a group home for foster children, but there have been gross abuses in other cases, in other places.

REINHARDT: Payments for foster care are on a sliding scale, more money to care for a teenager than for an infant. The highest stipend is for a handicapped teenager, say $20.00 to $25.00 a day.

MERROW: Although handicapped teenagers are the most difficult to care for, they are the most appealing to the foster parent with an eye out for profit.

REINHARDT: A group home with six retarded teenaged foster children would bring in roughly $55,000.00 a year.

MERROW: Abuses happen often enough to give foster care a bad name. Social worker Elizabeth Cole thinks that more than occasional scandals underly the bad image of foster parenthood.

SOCIAL WORKER ELIZABETH COLE DISCUSSES OUR ATTITUDES TOWARD POOR PEOPLE AND THOSE WHO TAKE CARE OF THEM

COLE: We have a very skewed view of people in trouble in the United States. We don't really think very much about our children. We claim that we care for our kids, but in fact I don't think we really do, when you get down to look at the health care and the education and the kinds of social services we provide children. We have a very negative attitudes toward the poor, poor people, and those are the families these kids come from. And in much the same way as we have a very poor image of the people who take care of the people we have in prisons, and we have a poor image of the kind of people who take care of the people we hae in mental hospitals, we have a very poor image of the foster parents who take care of the poor youngsters that we have in our child welfare system. It's somehow associating or attaching some kind of blame to the carers for the victim. The caretakers get stigmatized or rubbed somehow with the taint that we place on the victims.

And you know, the thing about it, John, is that we need more and more foster parents. We need better foster parents, because the youngsters we're getting in have far more problems. We have far less resources to be able to offer to foster parents, and here we are at the same time tarring them with this brush of the foster care system is bad. That's one of my regrets about the criticism of the foster care system, is that foster parents have been caught in that crossfire, that in our rush to remedy some of the ills we've had in the way we've taken care of kids, we've harmed some foster parents.

REINHARDT: Elizabeth Cole, a former foster care worker, now with the Child Welfare League in New York City.

MERROW: If there is a typical kind of foster care, it's the

kind Virginia Whidden provides, one, sometimes two, foster children, sharing a home for a year or so with the parents and their own children.

REINHARDT: Virginia Whidden began taking in foster children after her husband died in 1969. Since then she and her daughter Cathy have cared for 19 children, including one girl Mrs. Whidden adopted. She told John about some of the children she grew to love.

VIRGINIA WHIDDEN, A TYPICAL FOSTER PARENT, TALKS ABOUT THE CHILDREN SHE'S GROWN TO LOVE

WHIDDEN: Well, we had a little girl that was born a dope addict. Her mother was on LSD at the time of her birth, and she went through withdrawal for five days. They couldn't even put a diaper on her, she was in such pain. And we had her from 11 months. She didn't know how to sit up. She didn't know how to suck on a bottle. I don't know how she subsisted. And that was when they brought her here. And we had her for two and a half years, and they finally put her in an adoptive home.

MERROW: But two and a half years in foster care?

WHIDDEN: Oh, yes.

MERROW: A child's not supposed to say in foster care that long.

WHIDDEN: No. She was in DPSS for probably two years.

MERROW: That's the social service.

WHIDDEN: Yeah, trying to get the mother to relinquish. The father was ready to relinquish and did so. The mother was a little hesitant. She wanted to keep her baby. But they finally convinced her that relinquishment was the best thing. Then they had to find adoptive parents that weren't goosey about taking a child that had been born a drug addict, because at that time they did not know what the circumstances would be in her growth, and as it were she has developed into a very bright little girl.

MERROW: You've followed the case?

WHIDDEN: They get in touch with us about Christmastime every year, uh-huh.

MERROW: Other kids you've had?

WHIDDEN: Well, we had little Steven, who had been thrown out of an adoptive home, which we felt was pretty rotten, but he was

adopted at six weeks and was a very active little boy, had been treated in his adoptive home as a hyperkinetic and been given medication for it to the point where finally the mother just threw herself on a couch in a tizzy and said, "I cannot stand him any longer. You take him or I'll kill him." So the county took him back. And we had him for about six weeks when they replaced him with a fine, fine set of parents.

MERROW: They found another adoptive parent?

WHIDDEN: Yeah, and very nice people who have since adopted a little girl. But this is the first case that I had ever heard where an adopted child was fired back.

MERROW: Other kids you've had?

WHIDDEN: Then we got little Susan at 22 months that was very badly mistreated. I don't know that she was abused. Well, yes, she was. She had cigarette burns on her rear. Her mother had been told at birth that Susan had a very bad problem with her heart, that she probably could never do anything for her, and the mother was ignorant enough to take this as a final diagnosis and did nothing for her. And at the time that we got her, well, at two weeks she had spinal meningitis, on top of her heart problem, and at 22 months they finally -- the mother finally took her in to the county. She weighed probably about 9 pounds, and her birth weight was 8-1/2 pounds, and so she was -- and when we got her she was up to 11 pounds. She'd been in UCLA for two weeks. It turned out that she could not cry. She could not expel the tears. The tear ducts were completely dried up. She could not speak. Her vocal chords were completely paralyzed. She had the most beautiful complexion you would ever want to see, and her eyes are gorgeous. They still are to this day. Her hair was like straw. You'd touch it and it would snap.

Well, when we got her home we put her on the table here to change her diaper, and it just physically made us ill. Both Cathy and I just had to go to the bathroom. I mean we were ill. The bones sticking right up, the skin just covering bones. You could feel her organs. I mean she was in bad shape. But she started eating almost immediately, and she has multiple problems still. She's got a visual problem. She has a hearing loss of 75 -- huh?

MERROW: This was how long ago?

WHIDDEN: This was in '72. '71.

MERROW: How is it you know so much about her now?

WHIDDEN: Because she's our adopted daughter. She's the one we couldn't let go.

MERROW: Are you supposed to get attached like that?

WHIDDEN: No. I don't know whether you're supposed to. How can you not get attached to them? These little guys, I don't know, they can be homely as hedge fences and they can have temperaments like I don't know what, but you can't help it.

REINHARDT: Virginia Whidden, a foster parent in Los Angeles County.

MERROW: Mrs. Whidden adopted one of her foster children. In fact, the most severely handicapped. The system discouraged adoption by foster parents. If they adopt they might stop being foster parents for other kids.

REINHARDT: What's more, there are financial incentives that keep children in foster care out of adoption. The system pays for foster care, but the benefits stop when the kid's adopted.

MERROW: That's particularly discouraging when the child has any problem requiring medical attention. Foster children are covered by Medicaid. Adopted children aren't. And most family medical plans don't provide coverage for pre-existing conditions, that is for something that was wrong before adoption.

REINHARDT: New York State has a subsidized adoption plan, and new federal legislation will eventually create a national approach. But elsewhere, foster parents who want to adopt often cannot.

MERROW: Verna Rochina has taken legal custody of her two foster children, brothers, ages 14 and 16. They've lived with her for seven years.

VERNA ROCHINA WOULD LIKE TO ADOPT THE FOSTER CHILDREN IN HER HOME BUT SHE CAN'T AFFORD TO LOSE THE BENEFITS WHICH WOULD BE REVOKED IF SHE DID

ROCHINA: I had them for a year, and I got scared. I was afraid that the county -- they were coming along, progressing so well, and you know, you become attached to children, and I was afraid that they would take these children and place them someplace else. But I knew that they would bring me some more, but I didn't want to give these two up. So I got busy, went to court and got legal custody of them. Now, this way I will have them until they're ready to leave the nest.

MERROW: You've adopted them?

ROCHINA: No, I have legal custody, though. That's just about the same as adoption.

MERROW: Except it allows the Medicare coverage to continue, that sort of thing.

ROCHINA: Yes, and they give me, still give me a little money to help out.

Now, the youngest boy came to me about two weeks ago and he said, "Momma, I don't like the name Fenley." He said, "I want to go by Rochina."

MERROW: Your name.

ROCHINA: Yes. And I said, "Well, baby, I'll have to call the case worker and ask him." He said, "Oh, yes, he can change his name. We'll have to go to court." I said, "Yes, but will their Medical --," because they have very high dental bills, doctor bills and he said, "No, it's just that his name will be changed, that's all." So I thought I'd give the boy six months, and after six months if he still wants to change his name, then I'll take it to court, because it's quite expensive.

MERROW: He calls you momma.

ROCHINA: Oh, yes. Has from the day he came there.

MERROW: And your husband?

ROCHINA: Dad. They worship their daddy. They're crazy about him.

MERROW: Do they ever have any touch, any contact, with their natural mother, biological mother?

ROCHINA: Seldom ever. Seldom ever. They haven't seen her, oh, six or seven months.

MERROW: Any scars these kids have from foster home to foster home?

ROCHINA: The last place that they stayed was over on San Pedro. I know the address, but I wouldn't care to give it. She whipped them with an extension cord, and they have marks on them that they'll take to their graves, I guess. And of course I was right the opposite. I've taken them in and spoiled them to death. But child abuse is just something that I could never -- I

couldn't handle that at all.

MERROW: Psychological scars for those kids from going from home to home?

ROCHINA: It used to be, when they first came to me. But now, no.

MERROW: What do you mean used to be? What makes you say that? What signs?

ROCHINA: Well, you said psychological. When they first came to my house, every time their case worker would come the oldest one would have an asthma attack. The minute she walked in he would have an asthma attack, and I said, "Honey, why do you have an asthma attack every time the case worker comes," and he said, "Momma, I'm afraid she's going to take me away and they'll be mean to me," and he said, "I've been so hungry." You see, when they came to me, when they first came to me they'd go in the kitchen at nighttime when we were watching television, and they'd make up a big fat sandwich and take it in and hide it in their chest of drawers, so they would have something to eat during the night. And I found that one time and the youngest one, I said, "Honey, why did you put this sandwich in your chest of drawers?" And he said, "Well, momma, I get hungry in the night," and I said, "Then why don't you get up, go in and get fresh bread and lunch meat, whatever you want, and make you a sandwich? Come wake me up and I'll get up and make it for you if you're hungry." "Oh?" YOu know, that was so -- something that you know, they just weren't used to. They had to steal everything. It was bad when I first got them. Believe me, it was bad.

REINHARDT: Verna Rochina. She now has legal custody of her two foster children. She couldn't afford to adopt them but didn't want to lose them.

MERROW: Their case dragged on for years. That seems to happen in lots of foster care cases, which means years of impermanence and uncertainty for foster children.

Next, a closer look at foster children in limbo.

REINHARDT: The printed transcript of this four part report on foster children is available for $4.00. The cassette recordings cost $12.00.

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REINHARDT: The printed transcript of all four parts, $4.00.

The cassette recordings, $12.00.

MERROW: Our address again, National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036. Ask for Foster Care.

REINHARDT: You can also ask for our list of past Options in Education programs when you write, and please tell us the call letters of your own NPR station.

MERROW: Options in Education is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University. Support is provided by the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: John Merrow produces this series. Mary Rouse is our Associate Producer. Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer.

MERROW: Some of the material for this program came from Janet Bond, Station WILL, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. And we had technical assistance from Dave Glasser and Karen Blechman. I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt, and this is NPR, National Public Radio.

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FOSTER CARE, PART TWO

AN ANXIOUS BOY, AWAITING ADOPTION, IS AFRAID ANY MISCONDUCT ON HIS PART MAY LESSEN HIS CHANCES

MERROW: You've been here a little more than a year. Tell me about the beginning. Tell me about when you just came here.

BOY: I didn't just -- I didn't like it here. I didn't know what was happening. Because I used to live with someone, and I kept going and going, and then I came to this house, and I thought I was going to go on again, because they said I was only going to stay here just for a while. I didn't know what was going to happen to me then. After awhile she wanted to keep me, and they wouldn't give me up.

MERROW: They're not going to give you up now, are they?

BOY: No.

MERROW: Are you scared they're going to?

BOY: Yes. Only because when I do things wrong I always think she might kick me out like that.

MERROW: Do you worry about that?

BOY: Yes.

REINHARDT: Nine year old John is anxiously awaiting adoption by his foster parents.

MERROW: He's nervous because he's had his hopes dashed before. In three previous foster homes, adoption plans fell through for one reason or another, and he doesn't want that to happen this time. I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt, for NPR's Options in Education, with Part Two of our report on the 500,000 children in foster care, children waiting for a stable, permanent home.

MERROW: And wait they must, for overworked case workers and often delayed court hearings, for biological parents who can't provide a home, but won't release the kids for adoption.

REINHARDT: Or for the right adoptive parents.

MERROW: Margaret and Henry Lee have provided a stable home for foster children. The Lees have five sons, one born to them, three foster children they've adopted, and one they're waiting to adopt.

WHEN FOSTER MOTHER MARGARET LEE TAKES A FOSTER CHILD
INTO HER HOME SHE'S TOLD NOT TO MAKE PERMANENT ATTACHMENTS

LEE: When we went into foster care, we went in with the understanding it's temporary. You have to make the child feel very secure and part of the family, and yet you know any day the call will come and the child will go. And we try to tell ourselves the only thing that will help, or the only thing that will help us is that the child will take with him love. Maybe he'll never remember us, but love and training and character building, anything you want to call it, with him. But when it comes time for the break, it hurts. But then you have to fall back on those words and say, oh, well, we really loved him and he's safe now and he's okay, and after awhile the pain goes away. Not completely, but it goes, you know.

MERROW: Tell me a little bit about each kid. Let's start with -- well, let's start with your own natural son. Let's start with Henry, who's 19.

LEE: And the most fortunate, because now we know he would have been an only child. I have four brothers and four sisters, and I don't think there's anything worse than being an only child, really. So he really was the most fortunate. You know, he has all of his brothers. Extremely close, him and George. They're very different, but they're very, very close. Billy's just getting past the point of idolizing Henry, but still will look up and do anything for him and like that. The younger kids, too. They're very close, so there's not -- you know, I think Henry has gained an awful lot. I think Henry would say to himself, you know. And he's very proud. He'll tell anybody, "That's my brother," and stuff like that. They've always stuck up for each other and everything, you know, always.

HER BIOLOGICAL SON HENRY LIKES HIS FOSTER BROTHERS AND SISTERS

HENRY: I think if I didn't have them, you know, I think I would be a lot less happier, especially with George.

MERROW: You are very close to George?

HENRY: Yeah, very.

MERROW: At school was it ever pointed out to you in any kind of strange way that, hey, these kids really weren't your own brothers?

HENRY: Sometimes some people say we don't look alike, and sometimes, you know, we explain it, sometimes. But a lot of people know just that we're brothers, you know. But we used to

have -- Michael used to be here. I don't know if you know him. But he took off around three years ago.

MERROW: What do you mean, Michael took off?

HENRY: Well, he ran away. But he calls up once in awhile. You know, when you call up after and you didn't speak to him, after awhile it brings back all the good memories, the good times you had with him. And you know, you wonder why -- you don't wonder why, but you know why he took off and you wish he never did, you know. But now we've got John, so I'm happy with John. I couldn't choose between, you know, either one of them.

MERROW: How long was Michael with you?

HENRY: I think nine years.

MERROW: And he had not been adopted into the family?

HENRY: No. He was never adopted for some reason. I think they said he was too old or something. I wish he was, because you know, I guess when he lived here it wasn't even like -- well, it was always in the back of your head, you know, why wasn't he adopted. But it wasn't -- you know what I mean? It was just like -- it was, you know, as if he was our brother, you know what I mean? I mean he was our brother, but you know, you never felt or thought about him being a foster kid or being adopted.

MARGARET TALKS ABOUT A FOSTER CHILD WHO RAN AWAY

MERROW: Tell me about Michael, the foster child who I guess didn't work out, or --

LEE: Oh, no, Michael worked out. Michael had one natural sister and that was younger than him, and that's all that was in the family. His parents were divorced. Michael was in a previous foster home and he came to live with us when he was ten, but he had an awful lot of emotional problems. As a matter of fact the agency thought Michael should be in a home for emotionally disturbed children or something like that. But he was making out very well here, but he did have problems and he did go into the agency once a week for psychiatric counseling. My husband and I would bring him in. He stayed with us until he graduated from high school when he was eighteen.

MERROW: So he was with you for a long time.

LEE: He was with us for eight years. And he lives in the city now and he calls --

MERROW: But he ran away.

LEE: He ran away when he was about sixteen, something like that, sixteen. Everything began to pile up on him. I mean a lot. He had an awful lot of emotional problems. Then he came -- he always came back of his own accord. He ran away twice or three times, I don't remember. But when he was eighteen he graduated from high school. He was in the special ed. in school, but he got his diploma. And I really think he just wanted to go out and try to find himself, but he didn't have the courage to look us in the eye and say, "I want to leave."

He's in the city. He calls me. He hasn't called me now in about two, two and a half weeks. Sometimes he calls me when he's in trouble. Sometimes he calls me because he's very happy, he wants to brag about something. Sometimes he calls me because he wants to be 10 or 11 and he'd like me to be the mother again and go after him.

He did get in touch with his natural mother. He went to visit her. That didn't work out. He got in touch with his natural father and that didn't work out. He's a boy with a lot of problems.

MERROW: How come you never adopted him? You adopted all the others.

LEE: I know. Well, we did talk about it once. When -- he was about 16 when they were beginning to let older children go for it, go for the adoption, but the agency -- the agency really was very open about it. They thought Michael had too many emotional problems. Even when he was 14 and 15. Problems that they never really saw that -- you know, he'd carry through his life. He wasn't really going to solve everything. Again, that's why you just can't play God. You know, you just can't think I'm going to make everything right all the time.

MERROW: Do you like him to keep calling? Do you not want him to have contact with your other sons?

LEE: Oh, no, there's no reason why he can't. I keep telling him come, spend a weekend or come and see them. But if two, two and a half weeks go by, if it comes to about three weeks I begin to be concerned, because he could be hurt. He doesn't always carry identification. It could be that he's doing so well he doesn't need me as a crutch, or it could be that he's doing so poorly that he's too embarassed or too hurt to call up. So he's always there. He's always -- there's always a turmoil within me about Michael, you know.

For the longest time after Michael left it was -- and if you met somebody and they said how many children you had, it was like that hesitant. And I -- it made me think what happens if somebody has a son or a daughter and they die? Then do you say I have five, I have six, I had -- I mean he's just always going to be a part of it, you know.

MERROW: Tell me about George. He's 17.

LEE: George is 17. George came when he was 5-1/2. He was a foster child for I don't know how many years. I can't remember. George has been a typical boy. To me I used to call him the street kid. He could really give you a run for your money.

MERROW: Was he a tough kid when he came at 5-1/2?

LEE: He was extremely tough. He was 5-1/2 and he was acting like he wa 12 or 14. He's always been responsible for his younger brother Billy. He's always been responsible for entirely too much, and it was very hard for him to let go. He was afraid to become a little boy and start and act like a little boy. He's always been a natural athlete. He's extremely athletic.

WHEN GEORGE, WHO IS NOW ADOPTED, WAS A FOSTER CHILD HE AVOIDED USING HIS LAST NAME BECAUSE IT WAS DIFFERENT

GEORGE: Just like now, kids -- like when I was in elementary school, my name was Kaiser then, and then I went to JFK and half of the kids went to Barraud. That's another school. And then my name was switched there. And then when I come back to Komack North, everyone goes back together again, and you know, people still call me by my other name. And you know, they don't know.

And you know, like now I say, I say I was adopted. It's nothing now, you know. It doesn't bother me now, but it used to. You know, like I would just say my name got changed, and that's it. They -- that's all I'd say. I wouldn't say it for any reason or anything.

MARGARET SAYS FOSTER CHILDREN NEED LOTS OF REASSURANCE AND STABILITY

LEE: In school, it can go either way. As a foster child they totally dislike the double name. They must use their own biological name. It's all right for teachers because teachers understand, but their classmates and everybody will say, "Well, how come your name is different, " and stuff like that. And one day Michael and Henry and George were coming home from school, and now here's three of them with three different names. George was

not adopted. Michael was not adoptable and Henry is our natural child. And some kid asked them, "How come, if you're brothers, you all have different names?" I think it was Henry, I don't know, one of the boys, said, "My mother lets us use whatever name we want." Because, I mean, they had to have a sense of humor about it. Even though inside they're really hurting, and they are hurting, because once a child knows you're a foster child, then they want to know what does that mean, and now they're educating the children at school about handicapped children, about deaf children and children who -- they should also educate them as to what a foster child is also.

MERROW: School can be tough on a foster child.

LEE: Oh, it can be very tough, very tough. Because, first of all, they're not always secure within the home. So if the teacher's going to complain to the mother, it's not like your natural child coming home and saying, "Oh, I got in trouble today and got a note." He's coming home and he's still uptight. He's not that sure about you. You know, if they're there a long time and everything, they are. But they're still -- they're always trying to win your approval and do what's right.

Or they'll go the opposite way, "I don't care. I'm not going to get involved with them. I'm not going to like them. Because as soon as I like them something will happen and I'll have to move on." So the children are very insecure. You have to be aware of that. They either have to be very passive or always fighting with their classmates, because the thing of foster care comes up. "Well, why didn't your mother keep you? Why doesn't she want you? Where is your father? Do you have a brother or sister?" You be seven or eight or ten and have to answer those kinds of questions. It's not easy, you know.

Most of them just wind up using one name, their first name. They don't want a surname or a last name on the paper or anything. So, oh, I've seen it. I've seen it right here in the house with the children. You know.

Some children then are called by their last name at school all the time, and then when they're adopted it's very difficult to get the other kids to see. Then they have to start in and explain the adoption and then you have to start explaining why your mother and father never really took you back again. I mean they have to grow up when they're still very young and face adult situations. And then they're asked to understand adults. I mean it's one thing to say, oh, your mother was sick, or they just really couldn't get it together. But telliong that to a child and making a child -- they are words. Making a child really understand that?

MERROW: What do you tell your kids about their parents?

LEE: The truth.

MERROW: Which is?

LEE: Each and every one of them know it. One of them, their mother, his mother, was way too young. She was 16-1/2, 17, not married, and too young to get married and wanted a loving home for him, and even before he was born knew it, went to the agency, got help, and arranged for him to be adopted.

One of the other children, their mother is just an emotionally ill person, has always had emotional problems. The father deserted the home. She tried for many years to try to hold it together and couldn't. They were in foster care a very long time, hoping that the mother could put it all together and couldn't, and finally they were freed for adoption.

And the other little one, he knows. His whole family fell apart, mother and father. He was taken away by a judge and he knows that, and there's no putting the family back together again, and he's been searching and looking for a family. He's just dying to get adopted, you know. He can't wait. He's very uptight about it right now, because he knows it's getting close, and as it gets closer he's very insecure. He thinks he's going to do something and he'll blow it.

MERROW: Afraid?

LEE: Afraid that the least little thing that'll go wrong, he's the one that'll get thrown out, whether he's the cause of it or something else goes wrong. It doesn't really matter.

MERROW: Why does he feel that way? What's happened in the past?

LEE: Because this is his fifth or sixth home he's lived in and he's been in pre-adoptive homes before. It's fallen apart and you cannot convince him it's never been his fault. One couple went and started it and then they wanted a divorce. Another couple decided they didn't want a child, that she wanted to go back to work. All kinds of different reasons, you know, but he's been in -- he's been close to adoption before and it's fallen apart on him. He's 9-1/2. You'd think he was 19-1/2 for the life that he's lived.

JOHN, THE ONLY CURRENT FOSTER CHILD
IN MARGARET'S FAMILY, WOULD LIKE TO STAY

MERROW: This is John. Fourth grade?

JOHN: Yes.

MERROW: Nine years old?

JOHN: Yeah.

MERROW: When's your birthday?

JOHN: December 27th.

MERROW: You're kidding.

JOHN: You know, it's so lucky that it's two days after Christmas. Really, that's why, because I had Christmas at this house only so far I had it once, because I came here when I was eight, and I have only like been here for -- I've been here a year and about maybe three months.

MERROW: So you'll get another Christmas here pretty soon.

JOHN: Yes.

MERROW: And you'll get a birthday, too.

JOHN: Yes.

MERROW: I've always wondered about that. When you have Christmas and then the birthday comes right after it, does that mean you get fewer presents, because people say, oh, let's just give him one. Let's combine it. Or do you sometimes get two?

JOHN: I always -- my mother says, like, "John, do you want a radio?" Or she says, "Which is your best thing you want? You can't get a higher one." So on Christmas I just say, "I want it on my Christmas day, so you can just give me games." So really like the best thing out of everything, then she'll go back and say -- then on my birthday I'll just get a game. But this year I wanted -- I want something good on my birthday, and just presents on Christmas.

See, they're always even. Like they're always the same amount, like Henry gives us. Like no-one gets tons and tons more than the other person. It's always equal. They don't like -- they're nice. They don't try -- they try to keep doing things right for you.

MERROW: This is a pretty neat family.

JOHN: I know. It's nice. I like it. But at the beginning it kind of felt awkward. I don't know.

MERROW: You've been here a little more than a year. Tell me about the beginning. Tell me about when you just came here.

JOHN: I really didn't have that many manners, like. I didn't just -- I didn't like it here. I felt like I was going to go back and do something, like go with my first -- I didn't know what was happening. Like I thought I was -- because I used to live with someone and I kept going and going and then I came to this house and I thought I was going to go on again, because they said I only was going to stay here just for awhile. I didn't know what was going to happen to me then.

MERROW: What do you suppose happened, they fell in love with you?

JOHN: Yeah, and then they couldn't -- after awhile she wanted to keep me, and they wouldn't give me up.

MERROW: They're not going to give you up now, are they?

JOHN: No.

MERROW: Are you scared they're going to?

JOHN: Yes. Only because I think -- because when I do things wrong I always think she might kick -- don't want me and kick me out, like that.

MERROW: You say that and you're smiling. But you really do worry about that?

JOHN: Yes.

MERROW: But they don't seem like the kind of people who would send you away if you forgot to make your bed or if you kicked and screamed or something.

JOHN: Yeah.

MERROW: And they're going to adopt you.

JOHN: When?

MERROW: They're going to.

JOHN: I know, yeah. I know that. But I want to know when.

MERROW: How many different places have you been for Christmas? How many different houses and families?

JOHN: Six.

MERROW: Six? And you're nine years old. Have you ever had a really neat Christmas?

JOHN: Yeah, once, with the Kennedys.

MERROW: Maybe this will be a good one.

JOHN: Yes, very good.

MERROW: Have you started getting presents for your family?

JOHN: Yes.

MERROW: What are you going to give them?

JOHN: I'm going to give my -- my father likes old fashioned posters, so I have a book sale coming up, and I bought him one. And for my brother, he likes --

MERROW: Which brother?

JOHN: Henry, the big guy. He likes Stones, like Rolling Stones things. He likes rock. So I bought him three Rolling Stones things.

MERROW: Music.

JOHN: Yeah.

MERROW: And my brother George, I got him this thing, like, it's like -- not like -- it's a photo album, and then you open it up. This is made for rock and you put pictures in it. Like of rock or any kind of pictures. It's really a photo album. My brother uses it as like a book to keep all these good posters.

And for Steven, I got him -- I'm getting him a -- I'm going to get him one of these book things, tablets, and it's a sheet and you write on it and you lift it up and it goes away.

MERROW: Those are fun. You can make it disappear and then draw something new. Yeah. You can play tic-tac-toe and then you keep playing it.

JOHN: Yeah.

MERROW: How about your Mom?

JOHN: My Mom, I got it already. One of these -- a vase. Like I made one again.

MERROW: A what?

JOHN: A vase.

MERROW: Oh, a vase, yes.

JOHN: Because like I put it all in tape and then I made it in hot shoe polish and polished it all up, and it looks brownish.

MERROW: That's neat. You're all ready for Christmas.

JOHN: Yeah.

MERROW: Well, Merry Christmas.

JOHN: Merry Christmas. But only one person I have to get something for. That is I have to get one for Billy.

MERROW: Billy. What are you going to get for him?

JOHN: I don't know. He likes everything.

MERROW: It makes it easy. So you're going to live here for a long, long time. Forever, I guess, till you grow up and get married.

JOHN: Yep. I want to.

REINHARDT: John, foster son of Margaret and Henry Lee of Komack, New York.

MERROW: John and Michael have suffered from the slow workings of the foster care system. For many of their young years they were sent from pillar to post, from one foster placement to another.

REINHARDT: Twelve year old Carmen has had the good fortune to remain in one foster home, rather than moving through several. In fact, he's been in the same loving, supportive home for three quarters of his life, nine years.

MERROW: It took that long to free him for adoption. Why? Because his mother, a drug addict, kept making half-hearted attempts to bring him home. Not enough to make it work, but just enough to persuade the judge or the social service agency to give her another chance.

REINHARDT: Termination, the legal process that cuts off the parents and makes a child eligible for adoption, took years. And when the courts finally terminated, the natural mother appealed and lost.

MERROW: Today, Carmen can be adopted, and he wants to be. But his social worker says the foster parents, once certain, are now wavering and may not adopt him.

CARMEN ALSO WANTS TO STAY IN HIS FOSTER HOME AND IS TRYING TO BEHAVE SO THAT HE MAY BE ADOPTED

SOCIAL WORKER: We have hopes that they will. They are expressing some ambivalenced. We try to help people with a decision to adopt, particularly in view of the fact that psychologically these are his parents. However, it's also been our experience that in the long run, when a lot of ambivalence is seen and we can't resolve that, if a child has lots of difficulties in adolescence, sometimes foster families will ask for the child's removal.

MERROW: He's attached to them but they're not attached to him?

SOCIAL WORKER: Sometimes, but I think in this --

MERROW: But in Carmen's case?

SOCIAL WORKER: No, I think they are attached to him. I think that they have some fears which we are trying to help them with, and our hope is that those will be resolved and they will adopt him. However, in the meantime, we have not closed other options for him.

MERROW: Does Carmen know that his foster parents are ambivalent about adopting him?

SOCIAL WORKER: Yes.

CARMEN: They're a nice family and I wouldn't want to leave them. And they want to adopt me but they still want the Medicaid and the money, so that I can have the clothes that I need, and in case I break my leg I'll go to the hospital for free.

MERROW: So it's just a question of money, you think?

CARMEN: No, not really. I think it's other stuff that I can't explain at this moment.

MERROW: Try.

CARMEN: Let's see, like they figure that I'm always hurting myself, so they would like me to have Medicaid. They think that I have my bad points at times, and that reacts to them, that they might not adopt me, too, because of my bad stuff, the bad stuff that I do.

MERROW: Tell me about that.

CARMEN: Well, I argue a lot, and I yell, when I get mad, and I don't want to clean up my room or nothing. And they said if I want to live there I have to live under their rules. That's about it.

MERROW: Maybe they're reluctant to take that final step because they're not sure how you're going to turn out. I mean maybe you'll turn out to be a real trouble maker.

CARMEN: True. Yes, they may. But I really think they have faith in me and they will adopt me.

MERROW: That's wat you want.

CARMEN: Yes, that's what I really want.

MERROW: Have you told them that?

CARMEN: Yes, I did. And they said they'll see how I act. If I change, if I do the right stuff, they'll probably adopt me.

MERROW: Suppose another family came along right now. I mean you are eligible for adoption. Supposedly this agency might find another family that comes in and says, hey, we'd like a seventh grader, a 12 year old, and they suggested maybe you'd want to go with another family. Would you want to do that?

CARMEN: No, because I have lots of friends where I live now and I don't want t leave them, because they are like my real mother and I can never replace them, my real family.

MERROW: They are your real family as far as you're concerned.

CARMEN: Yes. As far as I'm concerned they are my real family.

CARMEN'S FOSTER MOTHER SAYS MONEY, AND NOT HIS BEHAVIOR, IS WHAT THE DECISION COMES DOWN TO

MERROW: Let me ask you the question. You're his foster mother.

MOTHER: Yes.

MERROW: What's the problem with adopting this young man?

MOTHER: The problem with adopting him right now is they would take away the Medicaid, which I was told before, and certain things, you know, that would cut away from him.

MERROW: The benefits that come in.

MOTHER: Yeah, that's right.

MERROW: To help you meet the expenses.

MOTHER: Right. Of his clothes, you know, because he's pretty hard on clothes and that --

MERROW: And he's growing.

MOTHER: And he's growing. And quite naturally his things cost a lot of money, you know.

MERROW: Well, you're worried about the money side of it. Suppose the adoption could be subsidized. Suppose the state would be willing to give him medical coverage, and then a certain amount of money was coming in. Would you adopt him then?

MOTHER: Yeah, if they would cover his medical, you know, things like that, and a little, you know, extra to help get his clothes and things that he needs, you know.

MERROW: You're retired, is that right?

MOTHER: Right. Right.

MERROW: Your husband?

MOTHER: Oh, the kind of work my husband do, he really don't make much money.

MERROW: So it's a money question.

MOTHER: Right.

MERROW: It's not one of being worried about him.

MOTHER: No, no, no, no.

MERROW: You love him.

MOTHER: Yeah. We've had him from three years old.

MERROW: You've had him for nine years.

MOTHER: Yeah. So, you know, it's hard to part with him like that, and I believe if he goes someplace else he probably would run away. He won't be so settled wherever he's at.

MERROW: Are you ambivalent in some way about him because of his past? Because his mother was a drug addict?

MOTHER: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. That's out of the question. I mean that's -- as far as I can look at that, that's in the past. I forgot all about that, you know what I mean? And that doesn't, you know, interfere with anything. It's just what I told you before.

MERROW: But you want to adopt him.

MOTHER: Well, yes, because you know, he's getting older now and I believe he would change, which I hope. I really hope, you know, he would change, but --

MERROW: I don't understand.

MOTHER: Quite naturally, he's going through these stages, you know. Boys do go through stages, you know. All children go through stages. Some children go through it in a nice way. Others are kind of wild with it, you know what I mean? And --

MERROW: I don't think I know what you mean about him, though. I mean he's going through some stages now?

MOTHER: Well, you know, the different stages. Some children are -- you know, you can't correct them as you would like to, and -- but so far he does listen. He does listen.

REINHARDT: Carmen's mother. Perhaps she and her husband will yet adopt Carmen.

MERROW: But for nine years, ambiguity has been a way of life for them. Sometimes opting for change is scarier than keeping the status quo.

REINHARDT: Perhaps if Carmen had been available for adoption four or five years ago, it wouldn't have seemed such a big step to his foster parents.

MERROW: In any case, the longer any child remains in foster

care, the more likely it is that he'll be damaged emotionally.

REINHARDT: What is this foster care system in which delay is the rule and not the exception? That next on Options in Education.

MERROW: If you would like a transcript of this four part series on foster care, send us $4.00. $12.00 for the cassette recordings.

REINHARDT: Mail your request to National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

MERROW: That's $4.00 for the printed transcript. $12.00 for the cassettes. And the address is National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

REINHARDT: When you write, please tell us the call letters of your local NPR station.

MERROW: Options in Education is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University. Funds for the series are provided by the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: Options in Education is produced by John Merrow. Associate Producer is Mary Rouse. Assistant Producer, Rebecca Goldfield. Technical Assistance for this program is by Greg Hedgepath and Dave Glasser. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: This is NPR, National Public Radio.

Program No. 278: "Foster Care, Part 3"

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FOSTER CARE, PART THREE

A JUDGE EXPLAINS THAT SOME PARENTS THINK THEY OWN THEIR KIDS

JUDGE: A case I had some years ago, the father stood up and I announced my decision, which was to allow the 15 year old to live with her sister, and he said, "No, Judge. As I see it, this here girl's my property, to do with her as I please." And I explained to him that children in fact were not property, they were people who just happened to be younger, and he couldn't get it through his mind that there was a difference between his car and his child.

REINHARDT: Parents don't own their children. In fact, when the state decides a home is unfit, parents lose the privilege of even keeping their children.

MERROW: This system of protection is known as foster care.

REINHARDT: Foster care is supposed to be a respite for a child who has suffered abuse or neglect. A temporary placement until the family can provide better care, or until the child is released for adoption.

MERROW: All too often, this solution is as devastating as the original problem. I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt, for NPR's Options in Education, with the third in our series on foster care.

MERROW: 500,000 children are in foster care today, and for many of them the supposed respite means being shuttled from foster home to foster home. For them, foster care means years of impermanence and instability.

REINHARDT: Why has such a well intentioned concept gone awry? Why such a large gap between humane theory and bureaucratic reality? The answer is there are major flaws at every level.

MERROW: Many people blame the social worker as the weakest link in the chain.

REINHARDT: Donna Strong, who grew up in foster homes and is now a foster parent, says that blame is misplaced.

DONNA STRONG, ONCE A FOSTER CHILD, SAYS THAT SOCIAL WORKERS ARE UNFAIRLY SINGLED OUT FOR BLAME

STRONG: Social workers, first of all, number one, are very dedicated people. They do like kids. And I've seen many social

workers in tears and I've seen workers that want to take a kid home because they are so emotionally caught up in the system. The fact that they are so dedicated is the only reason I can figure out why they stay on the job. Because if I was a social worker under the conditions that they're working in, I would not be on the job. You really have to be dedicated.

Number one, the system is so huge and so large and so bureaucratic and such red tape, many times a social worker, who is the closest to the whole situation, is caught in the middle, cannot make decisions. They have to work longer hours. They don't get paid for it. They're totally overworked. In Wayne County, the case load as of March 1st, is 80.25 per worker cases. That's absolutely unheard of, inhumanly possible to even handle. The majority of those cases are crisis, and that's the only ones they can handle on an immediate basis. That leaves somebody neglected someplace, and it isn't the fault of the worker. It's just that there's no time enough in the day. There's no -- I listened to a social worker's whole week schedule one time, and three out of the five days he was expected to be in court, which can be all day, on one case. The paperwork involved in a social worker's responsibility, the last number I heard was 33 pieces of paper per case. Okay? They're part time clerical help.

These people are educated people with a degree that are supposed to be able to deliver services and counselling and resources to people, families in trouble. There's no way they can begin that responsibility with all these other things going on.

I wouldn't want their job.

MERROW: Donna Strong. She was raised in 19 foster homes and is now a foster parent in Michigan.

REINHARDT: Most critics agree that the system is overloaded and inefficient. Peter Forsyth.

PETER FORSYTH AGREES THAT THE SYSTEM IS OVERLOADED AND INEFFICIENT

FORSYTH: There are states that have left caseloads uncovered for months and even years because of union negotiations or something else in which there was a shortfall a few years back. Massachusetts found three or four hundred kids that had no workers assigned to them at all. The more prevailing practice is just to add ten or fifteen, split up the uncovered caseloads among those who are already overworked, which gives nominal coverage, but in fact nobody paying attention to those children at all.

I think part of our task is to assure that if we don't have the capacity to provide a better alternative for the

child, then we don't remove the child. Society should not intervene in a family situation unless it can do better. Our statutes all say that and it's time we begin to honor that limitation.

MERROW: But if you're a foster kid, you're likely to have maybe not only a number of foster homes, but also quite a number of case workers.

FORSYTH: In fact, I suppose as often as not more case workers than I have homes. And that's a very serious kind of a problem. That's more typical, incidentally, in a public agency, than a private. But it's a very serious issue, and some of that has to do with the things you describe in terms of training and pay and workload and so on. Some of it has to do with simply lack of sufficient attention about the importance of some continuity in that situation.

REINHARDT: Peter Forsyth, of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York City. That foundation sponsored a commission to investigate foster care. The commission's report, "Who Knows, Who Cares," calls the foster care system an unconscionable failure.

MERROW: As a judge in District Court in Jefferson County, Kentucky, William McAnulty has to rule in many foster care cases. He deals daily with caseworkers and feel that some of the criticism they get is warranted.

BUT JUDGE WILLIAM MC ANULTY SAYS THE CASE WORKERS ARE AT FAULT

MC ANULTY: We all have a degree of responsibility for what we do. Okay. In their instance, many times the excuse is made that we aren't trained, or we don't receive the proper training in certain things. I know myself and the attorneys for the children and the attorneys for the county have done numerous training programs for social services agencies, and we've been over the same ground almost to the point of saying, "A, B, C, this is what has to be done.

I'll give you an example. In child abuse cases, where a child is admitted to a hospital and there is obviously a report that would indicate a diagnosis by the attending physician. We still find many cases that are brought to court without that diagnosis, without that basic information from a doctor or from the medical records, indicating what the probable cause of that injury was, be it accidental or not accidental.

That information is crucial. That is not a defect in training. That is a defect in the cognitive level in many --

of the cognitive level or ability of certain people who are hired.

MERROW: Okay, the system would work if there were more social workers who were better trained.

MC ANULTY: Maybe more, maybe fewer social workers who were better trained. I'm not so sure that all social workers are as overwhelmed as they let on to be or say they are. Many times it is an inability to manage the amount of work that you have that precludes you from being productive. The mere fact that you have 75 cases assigned to you may not be as overwhelming as it sounds.

MERROW: How could it not be?

MC ANULTY: Well, because each case involves a degree of work that varies. Some cases involve phone calls. Other cases involve a daily supervision. And the inability to sort one's work load and allocate their time appropriately, or even work overtime for that matter, if necessary, allows some workers to generate the excuse, "Oh, well, we're just overwhelmed, so we do nothing," in essence, "We just kind of float through our case load.

REINHARDT: Judge William McAnulty of District Court, Jefferson County, Kentucky.

MERROW: Richard Pancoss is concerned that educational requirements for social workers aren't high enough.

RICHARD PANCOSS IS CONCERNED THAT EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS FOR CASEWORKERS AREN'T HIGH ENOUGH

PANCOSS: There has been a definite move towards employing less qualified people in these kinds of positions by policy, that were we used to expect some training in social work, now we don't even expect training at the Bachelor level. It's anybody who is in off the street is now called a caseworker or a social worker, and I just came from a meeting where one of the principal addresses really was addressing this problem. And that really is you cannot expect someone who doesn't really understand how to do counselling, how to do working with families and so forth, to really do this kind of job. And yet we play the game that, you know, a staff member who is ill prepared can do the job just as well as one who is professionally trained and had some experience.

MERROW: Explain why we're in this fix.

PANCOSS: Because we think that cheaper is better.

REINHARDT: Richard Pancoss of the Children's Home Society of California, a private agency that provides foster care.

MERROW: As much as social workers come under fire, so do the agencies they work for. Foster parents complaint that agencies give them children but not the necessary information to go along with them.

REINHARDT. Perhaps that's why 40 percent of foster parents drop out in the first year. Dr. Patricia Ryan.

DR. PATRICIA RYAN DESCRIBES THE SPECIAL STRESSES ON FOSTER PARENTS

RYAN: Foster families get children who have been scalded in hot tubs. That is the punishment for the child was to dip the child in hot scalding water, up to his waist. They're not told. And when they go to give the child a bath at night the child becomes hysterical. The foster family thinks there's something wrong with the child. He doesn't want to be clean. They have no way of knowing that the bathtub is an instrument of torture for this child.

Can you see how you're setting the foster child and the family up for failure?

Let me give you another example. Many abused children have learned from their parents that the way a parent demonstrates love is to punish you, essentially to beat you up, beat you black and blue and maybe break a few bones. When a child like this goes into a foster home, what is the first thing they try and do? Get a foster family to beat them up, right? That's the only way you can establish a relationship with an adult is to have them beat you up. And I know of three cases in Michigan, of families that have raised their own children, raised a number of foster children who have wound up beating a foster child, becaue they did not know that child was a battered child, had not been forewarned.

Now, I don't want to excuse these people. I have a great deal of empathy. If you interact day in and day out with a child who is bound and determined to get you to beat them, it is very, very easy to sooner or later beat that child, because children will just drive you one step further until you're there.

GROFSOREAN: So people actually walk that blindly into these situations.

RYAN: Uh-huh. If you're somebody who has raised a couple of children successfully. Despite all the pitfalls in our society your kids have turned out okay, you never wound up beating them. You were really able to do a fairly good job. Why not try it with a couple of kids who are more needy. Never recognizing that because they are more needy that if you're going to parent those

kids you may need greater skills, greater sensitivity than you ever needed with your own kids.

MERROW: Dr. Patricia Ryan of Eastern Michigan University, where she's been running a foster parents' training program. She was interviewed for Options in Education by Michael Grofsorean.

DONNA STRONG RECALLS HOW SHE LEARNED TO BE A GOOD FOSTER PARENT

STRONG: I was just as scared and green and naive and dumb as everybody else that started out, scared to death that if I had a problem there's no way I would have called the social worker.

MERROW: Foster parent Donna Strong.

STRONG: I did not begin to get training until after I had been a foster parent about six or seven years, and I want to tell you, if I had had some training and had all those other kids back again, I would have done a lot of things differently. And I would have been able to know there were resources out there. I would have been able to know immediately who to call, and not be one bit intimidated or in fear of judgment or anything else, and I would have saved us all a lot of problems.

Training has taught foster parents parenting skills. It has taught us developmental stages of a child. We get a child in our home that is 12 years old acting like a five year old, we have to know immediately what do we do. What do we do with a 12 year old kid that is acting like a five year old. Do we treat him like a 12 year old and hope he'll just outgrow it, or do we go back to the five year old stage and bring him back up to being 12 again.

What do I do when a natural parent comes to my door at 11:00 o'clock at night and wants to see the child? How do you plan for a child that's going to be adopted? What do you say to these kids? How do you deal with that emotion it's going to go through? Especially when there's an attachment to the foster parent.

MERROW: Donna Strong. She lives in Michigan, one of only six states that now require training for prospective foster parents.

REINHARDT: There may well be inadequate communication between agency and foster parent, but there's virtually no communication among the many public and privat agencies that provide foster care.

MERROW: Agencies don't have a standard approach for screening prospective parents, to the detriment of the children.

REINHARDT: Here's an example. An agency learns a family is unsuited to provide foster care. It beats the kid, say. The agency removes the children but doesn't tell other agencies about the family.

MERROW: When that family applies to another agency, it gets another foster child or two, and repeats the pattern. Although that kind of thing doesn't happen very often, the potential for it is built into the system.

REINHARDT: Along with unprepared foster parents and overworked, inefficient case workers, judges are often cited as a weak link in the foster care system.

MERROW: And judges have tremendous power in that system. Nearly every child in foster care got there when a judge ordered the child's removal from his natural home.

REINHARDT: The judge is supposed to review each foster child's case once a year.

MERROW: And it's the judge who must decide when to terminate the biological parents' rights over the child.

REINHARDT: Do most judges have the expertise or sensitivity to make such weighty decisions? Donna Strong has her doubts.

SHE IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE POWER JUDGES HAVE

STRONG: When I grew up as a foster kid, I did not feel the judge could have either cared less about what happened to me. Once he made that decision it was just too bad. It didn't make one hill of beans if when I walked out that door, it didn't matter to him at all. And yet, you know, to me my stepmother and father had really done me badly, and all of us, had treated us like less than dogs. And yet I got locked up in the Wayne County youth home for being abused, and my stepmother went home and slept in her own bed and got taken care of. That didn't make sense to me, as a kid. It makes even less sense now, because I'm a little more trained on what's going on.

The other thing that's a problem is the guardians, or lawyers for children. I have gone in a personal experience to court and the lawyer that has been assigned to my child has gotten the folder in his hands five minutes before we walked in the door, and he says to the kid, "I think I'd better at least know your name." That is an alienation of a child's rights. That lawyer should have talked to that child a week before that hearing and gotten some pertinent information about the child, about how he feels about his family, what went on before, what's going on now,

what do you want to happen in your future. You know, what are your needs. And find out so he can go in with a little education as to what's happening in this particular case.

The thing I want to prevent is the kid coming back into care, which happens frequently.

MERROW: Foster parent and former foster child, Donna Strong.

REINHARDT: Peter Forsyth offers a qualified defense of the judges in foster care cases.

PETER FORSYTH OFFERS A QUALIFIED DEFENSE OF THE JUDGES

FORSYTH: Judges see themselves as protectors of some of those conservative virtues. They see excesses of government and do-gooders, who intervene where we shouldn't, and they properly are a check on that. They're dealingr with laws that may not be as clear as they ought to be in terms of standards by which one removes a child. They tend to be eternal optimists and hope that maybe tomorrow or next year or the year after these parents will shape up. They're protectors of the public purse, and when you remove kids permanently, you may in effect commit the county or the state to pay for the care of the child or subsidies for his or her care for the rest of their life, and many judges simply say, "I don't want to do that for my county if there's a chance of avoiding it." And many of them are simply uninformed about the human dynamics of the options. They are more interested in whether the child is properly clothed and fed and sheltered, what one judge used to call the hay, oats and water issues, than the questions of the emotional development of the child or the belongingness or the identity, some of the things that're pretty critical to the child's full development.

One of the ways to deal with that is to insist on mandatory judicial training in this area, whereas usually judges are trained only in matters of delinquency and sentencing and more criminal kinds of situations.

Another issue is to insist upon judges who have some interest in work with children, rather than having rotating judges on the benches who will deal with crimes and civil cases one month and children the next month. It takes some special talent.

In other words, there are a lot of strategies to deal with the problems of the judges, but there also are some complexities about why judges do what they do that, if we understand a little better, I think we'll make more progress towards changing them.

REINHARDT: Peter Forsyth, a foster care activist. He works for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

MERROW: Judges have to weigh competing interests, the natural rights of biological parents, the rights of a child and the responsibility of the state.

REINHARDT: That means tough decisions, particularly when a judge is being asked to cut off parents completely, to terminate. Judge Richard Revell.

JUDGE RICHARD REVELL HAS A REPUTATION FOR NOT PROLONGING TOUGH CUSTODY CASES

REVELL: You've got to keep in mind that termination is an absolute. Placing a child in a foster home is not an absolute. It's something that we can change our mind on a year later and give the child back to the natural parent, but when we terminate, then those rights are taken away forever.

MERROW: Tell me what goes through your mind when you're faced with a termination proceeding, when it's gotten to that degree.

REVELL: I would have to say that any contested termination is usually a close case. I get plenty of terminations where people don't even appear. That's not close. They're of no trouble to the court. We don't dwell on those kind, obviously, that the parents don't even think enough to come in and defend themselves. Whether they do defend themselves, they usually do have some argument. They usually have some grounds. That doesn't mean they prevail.

MERROW: What I'm told is a parent won't do anything at all until the termination proceeding is brought and then the parent will show up and say, "Judge, I'm a changed woman, I'm a changed man," and the judges will say, "Oh, well, go the extra mile and will say let's not terminate." And that that's the case where the judicial system messes things up.

REVELL: Well, I can't answer for all judges. I can answer for myself. I'm a -- my philosophy -- my judicial philosophy is that actions speak louder than words, and when I'm confronted with that kind of a case I normally do terminate them.

Those kind of cases don't judicially trouble me too much. They may trouble me and then I hate to take anybody's rights away from them, but I do it because that's what I've been put here to do if the facts in the law are met. But I do get a number of cases where they do come in just as you described, and

they say, "I would like to keep my right to visit the child. Well, the Department, they have their own attorney too, and they have pretty intelligent social workers who come in and know the facts and so testify, and they tell me the true facts, and when they divulge that this person, although they've been given visitation rights weekly, twice a month, monthly, however regularly they were set up and the person has gone six, eight, ten, twelve months without even seeing the child, then I don't have much trouble with those type of cases.

MERROW: What cases do you have trouble with?

REVELL As I say, the ones that trouble me the most are where there's merit on both sides, the Department is struggling to try to get the rights terminated, with the idea that they're on about the last leg of the adoptability, the suitability for placing the child for adoption, and although they really don't have an airtight case at this time, they've wrestled with the problem for two, three, four years, the child is now getting to be about eight, ten, twelve years of age.

MERROW: And tough to adopt.

REVELL: And tough to adopt, and they just feel like if they don't make their move now they're going to be stuck with that child or possibly stuck with that child in a foster home till they're grown. And those kind of cases usually -- and you can presume from the way I'm describing it, the parents aren't totally worthless. They make some effort. But they also keep sliding backwards, and then the Department has to step in again. And those kid of cases, after awhile, I suppose exhaust the social workers, and yet people sometimes I guess live with the hope that people will straighten out and that all will work out well. It doesn't always do it, though.

REINHARDT: Judge Richard Revell, of Circuit Court, Jefferson County, Kentucky. He has a reputation for not dealing, for not ducking terminato decisions.

MERROW: Judges in foster care cases are often criticized for letting their own values determine their decisions, and then saying they're acting, quote, "in the best interests of the child," close quote. Judge William McAnulty.

JUDGE MC ANULTY

MC ANULTY: I don't use those words, because I think those words have allowed more tyranny with respect to children and families than any other. What is in the best interests of the child is a subjective judgment usually, and the judge should be in

a position not to make a decision based on in the best interests. But as it relates to a specific statute. Is this child abused. Is this child grossly neglected.

MERROW: Okay, but I suspect it's not always as easy as that. I mean there's a great deal of gray and the differences are marginal. Suppose you're confronted with a situation where the natural home is really not all that good. You know, it's a poor family, the kids are sharing a room and sleeping three to a bed and you can do better, but not too much better, in foster care. What do you do? I mean do your own middle class standards get in the way?

MC ANULTY: No, what you described is a dependency situation where a child's under improper care, control and supervision. Dependency cases do not, should not result in removal. Where you've got no overt act on the part of the parents that's dangerous to the child. Being poor is not a crime in this country. And judges -- it's not now -- judges ought not to inject their middle class standards. We're not saying this home is unsuitable because it doesn't match up to the standards that I grew up in or live in at this point. That's not the test. Okay, the test is is that home unsafe, or unhealthy. For example, lead poisoning could result from eating chips off the wall. Or there are -- it's infested with cockroaches to the extent the child can't eat a meal without 40 roaches crawling in his plate and beating him to the food. Those are considerations. Not that it is a shabby home or that it is a marginally clean home. It's a balancing test. It's not a matter of being pro family and anti -- or anti family, or pro child or anti child. I believe the primary consideration is the safety of that child, which is paramount to the interest of the family.

Historically, you know, you have to put this in context. We're talking about a country that has adopted a biblical context out of Deuteronomy, which literally provides that if your child is not -- if your son or child does not obey, deliver him unto the gates of the city and stone him to death, have the fathers of the city stone him. You've also got the notion that it was not too recent in our history when it was not a crime to kill your child and it was not a crime. I don't mean in America, but the old common law. Nor was it a crime to inflict injury to your child. And we still have a lot of child rearing techniques that include assault and violent behavior, and it's just not a phenomenon of the lower class or the lower middle class. There are people in all walks of life who believe that children who are not paddled significantly and severely as they grow up won't grow up right. And I've had just numerous parents stand before me and say, "Well, Judge, if I don't hit them with that comb or if I don't hit them with that hairbrush, they're not

going to behave."

MERROW: The basic problem is not something having to do with foster care, which really is a response. The problems originate in parenting.

MC ANULTY: Parenting in the sense that the notions of being a parent are somewhat strange in many instances. The notio of force. The notion of violence. The notion of control.

MERROW: Ownership.

MC ANULTY: It is. It's a property notion. A case I had some years ago, the father stood up and I announced my decision, which was to allow the 15 year old to live with her sister, and he said, "No, judge, as I see it this here girl's my property to do with her as I please." And he was saying what more sophisticated people would not say, would be embarassed to say. And I explained to him that children in fact were not property. They were people who just happened to be younger. And he couldn't get it through his mind that there was a difference between his car and his child. And he treated them similarly. You buy and sell personal property. You do with your child as you please. And I think that mentality is a little more prevalent than we would like to believe.

MERROW: You're saying he was unsophisticated. He said it right out loud.

MC ANULTY: Exactly. Whereas a number of people, I believe, think the same way, but are smart enough or aware enough not to say that in a courtroom context. But they actually practice it or they treat their children as though they're, you know, pieces of property to be sold, traded, dropped, whatever.

REINHARDT: William Mc Anulty, Judge of District Court, Jefferson County, Kentucky.

MERROW: Another flaw in the system, the federal government which, with all sorts of good intentions, provides funds for foster care. Trouble is those funds are earmarked for certain services, and naturally those are the ones the states have decided to provide.

REINHARDT: In the past, no money for preventive services or for assistance to put families back together, or for post-adoptive services. The federal dollars, ironically, have kept kids in foster care.

MERROW: There is new federal legislation and there are some other new approaches.

REINHARDT: That's part four of this series, next. Hope you can be with us.

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MERROW: Ask for our list of past Options in Education programs, and we'd like to know the call letters of your own local NPR station.

REINHARDT: By the way, we've just celebrated our fifth year as a regular NPR series, and we're making big plans for year number six. We'd like your ideas, options you'd like to hear about.

MERROW: Options in Education is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University, with support provided by the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: John Merrow produces Options in Education. Mary Rouse is our Associate Producer and Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer.

MERROW: Barbara Reinhardt serves as reporter and co-host, and we've had technical assistance for this program from Karen Blechman, Allen Korbuth and Greg Hedgepath.

REINHARDT: Some of the material for this program came from Michael Grofsorean, WUOM, Ann Arbor, Michigan. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, and this is NPR, National Public Radio.

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FOSTER CARE, PART FOUR

THE FANTASY OF A FORMER FOSTER CHILD

FOSTER CHILD: The fantasy of mine is the law should say that no foster kid can be removed more than once. He's already been removed from his family. That's detrimental enough and traumatic enough. Place him one time in a foster home. Work it out.

MERROW: The fantasy of a former foster child. She grew up in 19 foster homes.

REINHARDT: A fantasy is just that, a dream. Our foster care system, responsible for an estimate 500,000 children, is just about guaranteed to move a child from foster home to foster home, in some cases for years.

MERROW: The system is supposed to provide a temporary home for abused or neglected children until their families can provide better care, or until the child is released for adoption.

REINHARDT: Instead, the system creates instability and insecurity, often resulting in emotional damage to the child. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, for NPR's Options in Education, with the final part of our report on foster care.

REINHARDT: This time, some possible solutions.

MERROW: Let's being with that former foster child, now a foster parent in Michigan. She'd like to end the uncertainty that's now part of just about every foster child's life.

SHE'D LIKE TO END THE UNCERTAINTY THAT'S PART OF EVERY FOSTER CHILD'S LIFE

FOSTER CHILD: Why should I sit here and tell you I was in 19 placements? I'd already been rejected by my parents. The one question no-one will be able to answer for me is why, and to be rejected 18 other times? That's no joke. Because when I want to build a relationship with somebody, how will I ever know it's for real? Will I ever always be able to believe without question, without analyzing, without looking into depth or waiting for a mistake to be made, to really believe that that relationship is real.

My fantasy is that the law states once a child

comes into care he must have a plan that must be implemented in six months or no longer than a year. It's either he will return home and there will be intensive working with that family and child, they have to both simultaneously work together, and returning that child, getting the home situation better than it was when the child left. Improving the home situation, whatevber that will take and making that child's childhood a happy memory.

If that plan cannot be implemented, then let's go to adoption. Give that kid a permanent situation in the shortest length of time, so there's less trauma to that child, and let him get his life together. Going on. He's only going to be a child till he's 18 years old That's the only chance we have. You ruin that for a kid, and you may ruin the rest of his adult life. Okay.

The adoption would be the next line. If that isn't going to work, and with the older adolescents some children do not want to be adopted because of fear of being rejected and going through the whole scene again. So they choose not to be adopted. I still want to plan for that kid until he at least knows, until I'm 18 this is where I'm going to be. Nobody's going to move me.

My fantasy would be that someday foster parents would be professional. You could, you know, be a career foster parent. There's nothing wrong with that. I think with training, and we have good training -- I am a specialized foster parent. I should be treated as a specialized foster parent. My agency should know to call Donna Strong, she takes teenagers, and this is the way we have worked it out as an agency, there'll be pre-placement visits. She knows exactly what I'm about, how I go about it, what is the interaction relationship with the worker, the agency, et cetera, et cetera, and it will be a working thing. That child -- there's no need to talk about placement somewhere else, because she knows me well enough to place that child one time and only one time.

MERROW: Donna Strong, a foster mother in Michigan. She helps train foster parents in a program at Eastern Michigan University. Michigan is one of only six states requiring training for foster parents.

REINHARDT: For Donna Strong the problems are untrained foster parents and indecision in the system.

MERROW: Other critics attack a different problem, a lack of consistency and continuity among foster care agencies.

REINHARDT: Most foster care is publicly provided and paid for. Some private, voluntary agencies contract with the city or state to provide foster care. Others remain independent. Problems develop because often these different agencies don't even talk to each other.

MERROW: The results? Confusion, jurisdictional squabbles and kids falling through the cracks.

REINHARDT: There are no uniform standards or procedures for licensing foster homes.

MERROW: Some religiously affiliated agencies simply refuse to submit to inspectio and licensing. That's legal if they're not accepting public funds.

REINHARDT: Peter Forsyth says that uniform licensing of foster homes would be a major improvement. Largely because it would reduce the use of large group foster institutions, where 25 percent of foster kids live.

PETER FORSYTH SAYS THAT UNIFORM LICENSING OF FOSTER HOMES WOULD BE A MAJOR IMPROVEMENT

FORSYTH: I would say the larger the care the more negative it's likely to be, the more regimented, the less home like, so that group homes as we know them, or small groups of four, five or six kids, with a professional foster parent or some kind of supervision, are not as negative, as far as I'm concerned, as congregate care where it's simply a matter of caretaking or warehousing the child.

There are children who can only live in what we would call an institutional setting, but they're usually children who need some kind of intensive, residential treatment or intervention, and we ought to be sure that kin of service is there before we deprive a child of living in a more home like atmosphere.

The abuses one hears about and reads about that are some of the worst, indeed come from unsupervised programs. But I'd hasten to say that the quality of our supervision or our licensing or our standards, even though I believe in all three, are not such that we don't occasionally make mistakes there as well. I mean it's not a foolproof guarantee that programs will be good just because they're licensed. But licensing, indeed, tends to be a protection for the public and I think these kinds of licensing programs should be strengthened.

One of the things we can do to alleviate this, incidentally, something we haven't talked about here, is trying to find foster families or substitute families that are more akin to where the child came from, closer to the child's neighborhood, from the same ethnic or racial or community group or economic level or something else, so that the way the foster family operates and understands may not be as completely different from that which the child understands and expects as would be in the other kinds of cases.

There's a lot of attention being placed on the fact that the farther you remove a child from his physical home, his culture, his school, his group if you will, the more difficult will be the re-integration into that family when he or she goes back.

Now, I'm obviously not suggesting that you look for abusing foster parents to care for kids who have been abused. But I am talking about looking for families who may understand the diversity of life styles in this society, and not taking a kid from a ghetto situation and plunking him in Forest Hills. And we've done this kind of thing. Not taking a child who may have a particular pattern of reacting to parents on an ethnic base, maybe, a Hispanic child or Puerto Rican child, where the family traditions and interaction techniques are vastly different than they would be in another ethnic group. And you place that child in another situation, even if he or she can make it, learn English instead of Spanish, et cetera, you have created such a foreign environment that the return to the bio-family becomes more and more difficult.

I know of cases where Spanish speaking kids have been put in English speaking foster homes, and when the parents got their lives together and came back to get the kids, the kids couldn't speak Spanish anymore and couldn't talk to the parents. I mean that's the most obvious kind of a case, where we bridge too far and cut some things off that we had no business to cut off.

MERROW: Peter Forsyth of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York City. That foundation sponsored the National Commission on Children in Need of Parents, whose report calls foster care a, quote, "unconscionable failure," close quote.

REINHARDT: A persistent criticism of foster care is that judges are too conservative, too inclined to put a child back into a bad situation instead of cutting the child free and releasing him for adoption. 80 percent of foster kids eventually go back home.

MERROW: Some foster parents feel this judicial pro-family slant is actually anti-child. Virginia Whidden talks about some of her own foster children.

VIRGINIA WHIDDEN SAYS DECISIONS SHOULD BE SWIFT
WHEN CHILDREN'S FUTURES ARE AT STAKE

WHIDDEN: For instance, in the case of the little girl that was born of the mother that was under LSD, they tried to get that child away from the mother through the courts, and the judge felt the child should be with the mother. Now, the mother couldn't stay off the drugs. What right did he have to put her back and keep her with the mother? I mean it just doesn't make good sense.

MERROW: Well, it may not make good sense, but he has every right. The judge has all the power.

WHIDDEN: Yes. He has the power and he has the right, but this is why I say the judicial system, I think, is more to blame for the way the caseworkers that we have had just won't fight anymore.

MERROW: You think the system is too subjective and too ambiguous, the court side of it?

WHIDDEN: Right. This little girl that just left in May, I don't believe had any right in the world going back to a father who loved the kids, sure, he loved them very much. But he also had a log on his shoulder. Not just a chip, but he had the full tree. He wanted his children back. He felt that the county was taking them away from him, and what the county was doing was keeping those kids so that they were warm and dry and healthy, and to this point he can't do this.

Now, he has all the summer clothes that these two little girls had, but he has nothing for winter. And sure, they go barefoot in the summertime, but they can't go barefoot in the wintertime. Even L. A. gets chilly.

MERROW: So you'd want the judge to be quicker to terminate, to move in and say let's separate these people and put this kid up for adoption.

WHIDDEN: Not necessarily quicker, but I think that they should look into it a little more deeply and accept more of te case workers' findings. I've had more than one case worker tell me that there is just no sense in going into it too deeply, because the judge isn't going to take it anyway.

MERROW: The system has a bias toward putting a child back into the biological home, the natural parents. Do you think that's correct?

WHIDDEN: No, I think that's wrong in a lot of cases. Just because a woman has given birth does not make her good. She's not necessarily capable of taking care of her youngsters. And I think, frankly, that the -- not necessarily separated for ever and ever and ever, but I certainly do feel that as in the case of this last little girl, that they could leave her in foster care but set up a system where the father could help to support the child and perhaps have weekends with the child, vacations with the child, but not have full custody of it.

REINHARDT: Virginia Whidden of Los Angeles. She's cared for 19 foster children in the past 11 years, one of whom she ended up adopting.

MERROW: From a judge we get nearly the opposite recommendation. I asked William McAnulty, who rules on foster care cases in Jefferson County, Kentucky, what he'd do with the foster care system if he were in charge.

JUDGE WILLIAM MC ANULTY ON WHAT HE'D DO WITH THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IF HE WERE IN CHARGE

MC ANULTY: Probably abolish it in the sense that it is there. We in government have a tendency to use what's there. If it's there it's got to be used. I think it stifles creativity. It is too convenient in many instances, because it's there and you can just do it right there, and that allows some people in the social services area not to follow up on their case responsibility as much as they ought to because the child is in foster care. The child is being taken care of. Look, we've taken this child out of this abusive home and he's now in a good foster home. Without realizing that the idea is to get the child back in a permanent situation, not a temporary situation.

If that resource were not available, then social workers would have to do more intensive work with parents, and they would also have to look harder for other relatives, or non-relatives, friends of family who are capable of providing quality care and who wish to. There are a number of people available.

It is doubtful in our lifetime that we'll see foster care eliminated, but I'm not aware of any system that's more well-documented with failure that is allowed to exist.

MERROW: And yet the foster parents I meet, the homes I go into are by and large lovinn, caring homes.

MC ANULTY: But they don't have control over this system. They are the service providers. The state, be it the State of Kentucky or any other state, has a complete domination over foster parents. There are regulations that they have to comply with, some of which do not resemble logic in the least. And foster parents are just caught in a bind. Where they want to adopt a child they are told no, you're just temporary service providers. Where they want to provide a sense of permanency, the state usually intervenes and attempts to preclude them from doing that.

MERROW: You're saying if you did away with that, that cushion, then the system itself would be forced to look harder to find ways to provide preventive care, to keep families from falling apart in the first place.

MC ANULTY: That's the only -- I mean it's very well documented that preventive and educational programs in the are of abuse and neglect are more effective than anything you do after the fact.

MERROW: You as a judge are in the same position as social workers. You know what services are available. I mean it doesn't do you any good then to say, when a case comes before you to say, "Oh, let's do some more work at home. Let's get them more services at home. Let's do more preventive work," if it doesn't exist. So even for you the cushion of taking a kid away, putting the child in foster care, exists.

MC ANULTY: Oh, I agree. I'm as locked in as they are to some extent. I just see my function as screening the recommendations that are made, to make sure that they are not recommendations of availability, but recommendations of appropriateness, that they are not filling resources because there is a placement available, but rather that there is some documented reason that this child needs that particular resource. And that's probably the best that you can do in this capacity, keeping as many players as you can honest, including yourself.

REINHARDT: William McAnulty, Judge of District Court in Jefferson County, Kentucky.

MERROW: Patricia Ryan, who started a training program for foster parents, doesn't accept the suggestion that foster homes are expendable.

PATRICIA RYAN, WHO STARTED A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR FOSTER PARENTS, REJECTS THE IDEA THAT FOSTER HOMES ARE EXPENDABLE

RYAN: I think that's throwing the baby out with the bath. There will always be family situations where either the family of a child needs respite -- sometimes it will be situational. A mother with three or four young children and no family who has to go in the hospital. Well, perhaps we could send a homemaker in to live there and take care of her kids in her own home. But she's not going to be there, so it would be foster care in her own home. That would be preferable, certainly, to having foster care outside of their own home. But in a sense it's still going to be foster care. If she has to go into the hospital and she has no relatives, we're going to have to do something with those kids, aren't we?

A family who has a severely handicapped child and really can't make a go of it. Any family under a severe emotional stress. Families that have a serious problem with alcoholism and substance abuse.

All of these situations may call for short term relief. I think the critical problem -- here is where I would agree with the judge -- is that when we use foster care it should be the plan of last resort, because there is nothing else we could do that would maintain the child with his family, first.

Second, we should make sure that whatever we're doing by placing that child in care does not make it more difficult for the family to be reunited with the child as quickly as possible. And that's where our system falls down, is that we put kids into care too quickly, and once they're in care we often make it much easier to keep them in care than to return them home.

MERROW: Dr. Patricia Ryan of Eastern Michigan University, interviewed for Options in Education by Michael Grofsorean. Ryan wishes the system would recognize that foster parents often know their kids better than anyone else, and she says case workers and judges should seek their ideas and suggestions.

REINHARDT: Half the two billion dollars we spend on foster care comes from the federal government. Most of the money is now earmarked for services which are provided only when a child is actually in foster care. Medical coverage, for instance, doesn't start until the child's in and stops when he goes back home or gets adopted.

MERROW: That amounts to a disincentive to get him out.

REINHARDT: Things are supposed to change, now that Congress has passed and the President signed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980.

MERROW: California Congressman George Miller, one of the sponsors of the legislation, says a new law was necessary.

CALIFORNIA CONGRESSMAN GEORGE MILLER, ONE OF THE SPONSORS OF NEW LEGISLATION CONCERNING FOSTER CARE

MILLER: It can't get any worse. The system that's in a shambles prior to the signing of this legislation, there was no way you were going to correct it, absent this. The key to the legislation is that we think by offering some up front services to families that are in trouble, that we can prevent many of these children from ever entering the case load of that social worker.

We have seen, time and again, around this country, where local communities have made a concerted effort, they have cut their foster care case load by better than half. In many instances with very little governmental help. But by knowing that services are there. If they can take an alcoholic father or mother and provide counselling for that family, that family may be able to stay together. That mother or father may be able to work out their problem They can stay employed, and we don't have a child in foster care. But if we never offer that family help, the family falls apart, a divorce takes place, the kids are scattered to the winds, and the federal government pays to pick up all of the pieces.

The intent of this legislation is to try to provide social workers with more resources to keep families together.

MC VICAR: There's a theme there of a pro-family approach. How does this compare to the pro-family rhetoric we've been hearing lately across the country?

MILLER: It's diametrically opposed to it. It just doesn't work. A lot of the so-called pro-family operation now is a policy of saying everything is okay in the American family ahnd we're going to do nothing. That couldn't be further from the truth. All you have to read is any study, any group of statistics, whether it's the FBI's, whether it's HEW's, whether it's the Department of Defense, and find out what's going on in the American family. there's a lot of trauma. There's a lot of strain. And good, decent people need some help. Whether

it's with drugs or alcohol or marital problems. You know, if they have made the decision to ask for help, I think we ought to be there. Not just turn our back and say, "Work it out yourself." There's a lot of families that just can't do that. So do we want to wreck another generation of children? We know that a person who's abused as a child stands a much greater chance of being a child abuser when they grow up. We know that our prisons are full of them. So what do we want? We talk about breaking the welfare cycle. Well, this is how you start breaking that cycle. We talk about breaking the child abuse cycle. This is how you start breaking that cycle. Otherwise, we just pay for these kids over and over. We see them in foster care and we pay the money. We see them in the courts and we pay the money. We see them in the juvenile halls and we pay the money. Then we see them in jail and we pay the money. Then they bump somebody on the head and we pay the health bill. They rob a store, we pay the insurance bill, and then we see the kid in prison.

That's a testimony to sticking your head in the sand.

REINHARDT: Congressman George Miller, a Democrat from California, interviewed for Options in Education by Greg McVicar.

MERROW: Congress has been known to pass laws and then never provide any money, but this law has a built-in incentive. It works this way. If Congress doesn't provide at least $164 million, then the old system, the one Congress rejected as wasteful, remains in effect.

REINHARDT: The House of Representatives has approved the required amount, but the Senate hasn't acted. The decision might be left to the new, more conservative Senate, next year.

MERROW: The uncertainty doesn't diminish the enthusiasm of the bill's supporters. Elizabeth Cole, of the Child Welfare League.

ELIZABETH COLE IS OPTIMISTIC

COLE: For the very first time in the history of our country, we at least have a piece of federal legislation which espouses those principles. Before the federal government would give money on a matching basis to keep a youngster in foster care and in an institution, but wouldn't provide the same kind of incentive to agencies, to either restore the youngster's home or to --

MERROW: Before, there were incentives that led to the kid staying in foster care.

COLE: Absolutely.

MERROW: You're saying now the incentives now are to get him back home.

COLE: Now the incentives are at least co-equal. Now a piece of legislation has passed which has said the federal government is going to espouse the principles of permanent planning for youngsters and permanent families for youngsters, meaning let's evaluate the original family.

But the key point, I think, is the point you raised before, is that the appropriation really hasn't been attached to that bill, and so while we've gone -- so far we haven't gone the whole way. And the monies that would make those things possible just haven't come yet.

MERROW: Neither are the regulations. Regulations are the key part of any law. A lot of people think, well, when the law is passed that does it, but in fact then the bureaucrats take over and work out the details. Those regulations aren't written. And yet I meet a lot of people like you who work for agencies, who somehow feel that the millenium has come.

COLE: Well, you know, the crazy thing is the fact that you can't feel that the millenium has come and have both feet on the ground and work in this field, and yet on the other hand, John, you can't be as kind of defeatist as you sound, seem to sound. I mean the point is there are a tremendous number of barriers that have to be overcome, but I really do believe we've turned the corner in the sense of a new commitment to those kids, in the sense that there is even an attempt to have resources flow, in the sense that they're even writing rules and regulations.

Now, Lord knows, when those things are published, they're probably going to need to be amended again and again, and there's going to need to be a lot of vigilance and accountability that's going to have to be charged with -- people are going to have to be charged with seeing that those things are carried through so that they mean something.

But I really do believe it when I say I've worked in this field for 20 years now, and for the very first time I really do believe that people are putting their money where their mouths are.

REINHARDT: Elizabeth Cole, of the Child Welfare League in New York City.

MERROW: The regulations she referred to are still being drafted. The next step is approval by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, then publication for comments and reactions. After that, revision.

REINHARDT: It might be months before final regulations are approved, and the change in Administrations will surely slow down the process.

MERROW: Advocates say that regulations cannot change the thrust of the new law, which is to provide permanence for children and keep them out of foster care.

REINHARDT: But according to Elizabeth Cole, a supporter of the bill, the new law cannot get to the root of the problem.

ACCORDING TO ELIZABETH COLE, THE NEW LAW CANNOT GET TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

COLE: Unless our society, I think, really recognizes that we can't resolve the problem of poor families through the children, by creating programs for the children, we're going to have to do something also to relieve the poverty of the parents. We're only going to be doing makeshift bandaids and we're going to be building bigger hospitals at the base of the cliff, rahter than repairing the road, and causing people to come into the emergency ward.

Absent a real redistribution of wealth and absent a real finding of a strategy for poverty, we are always going to have children who are at risk.

All children's health problems, most severe children's health problems, most severe children's educational problems and most severe child welfare problems can be traced to poor families for the most part. 95 percent of them are all being experienced in poor families, and to me it's -- no matter what we do as social workers in our agencies, absent some help from the larger community, we're only going to be able to do, as I say, bandaids where major surgery is needed.

MERROW: But the truth is that today, even though we have fewer children, more children are in crisis situations or are at risk, and even though we are, as a nation, richer, there are more poor families.

COLE: I think so. Poor is such a hard thing to pin

down. You asked me before how do you know when a family is fit. How do you know when a family is poor. I think there are far more poor families in our society today, if one uses a relative standard, if one says let's look at the distance between the people who have a lot of money and the people who don't have a whole lot of money, that distance I think is getting wider, and there are more people who are getting -- who are poor.

MERROW: It works this way, then. You have poor families who, because perhaps of the stress, the pressure of not having enough money, things go wrong and the kids suffer, the society reacts and blames the family --

COLE: Rescues the youngster.

MERROW: Rescues the youngster in some way, and if in fact we even think about, well, we need to provide these people with some resources, we then say to ourselves, hey, wait a minute, we're rewarding these people for being poor, and somehow the fact that they're poor is their fault anyway, right?

COLE: Yeah. It seems to me rather than redistribute our resources and our wealth, we think it's okay to redistribute the children. You know, it's okay to remove a youngster from the poverty family. That's the form of rescue we'll have. We'll put him in a family where he'll be taken care of, and honestly, that really helps and works when the youngsters are in crises.

But as I said, I think we really do need to think of ways where we can redistribute some of our resources to the families so that they can stand alone.

Families are in trouble in the United States, and if you take any family problem that you hear discussed, read discussed in magazines, concern for the family is mounting. But most of them -- the articles and most of the commentaries focus on what can we do for the middle class family, when the poor family, it seems to me, is the one that needs most of our help.

REINHARDT: Elizabeth Cole of the Child Welfare League in New York City.

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MERROW: Options in Education is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University, with support provided by the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: John Merrow produces Options in Education. Mary Rouse is our Associate Producer and Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer.

MERROW: Barbara Reinhardt serves as reporter and co-host, and we've had technical assistance for this program from Greg Hedgepath and Allen Corbuth.

REINHARDT: Some of the material for this program came from Michael Grofsorean, WUOM, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Greg McVicar, KZAP, Sacramento, California. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow, and this is NPR, National Public Radio.